

Harald Weydt

## **The Semantics of Ethnic Denominations: What is the Meaning of “Mexican”, “American”, etc.?**

### **1. Names**

One can only identify oneself with a group which has a name. At least, identification with an ethnic group is easier, clearer, and deeper, if the group has a name. The group's denomination becomes the symbol of identity, and therefore of self-esteem, pride, and positive or negative attitudes. For this purpose, it must be clear who is meant by an ethnic denomination and who not. This article deals with cases in which ethnic groups and their names cannot be related unambiguously to each other, thus profoundly disturbing the communication at a very sensitive point. The reason for this often lies in the specific structure of the semantics of natural languages.

#### *1.1 The struggle for names*

While names of ethnicities are mostly undisputed and agreed on by everybody, they sometimes become the object of a struggle and are claimed or refused by different groups. The attempt of taking the name from someone or of denying someone a name, is then felt as a blatant offence and can lead to severe consequences. Two examples from Eastern Europe can serve as first illustrations. Greece and Macedonia currently find themselves locked in an open and bitter dispute about the denomination *Macedonia* and *Macedonian*. As the Greeks consider the Macedonian Alexander the Great a Greek, they sustain the idea (neglecting a Slavic speaking *Macedonian* minority on the Greek territory) that *Macedonian* can only refer to a variation of Greek. They argue and defend the idea that – unlike Greek speaking inhabitants of the Greek region called *Macedonia* – the Slavic or Albanian-speaking Macedonians in former Yugoslavia have no right to carry this name. On the other side, these former Yugoslavian Macedonians, feeling themselves rooted in a long historic line of forefathers which were all undisputedly called *Macedonians*, identify themselves

with this name, and categorically reject the idea of giving it up. They consider any questioning of their name as an unfair interference of neighbors into their national affairs.

The second example concerns the names *Russia* and *Russian*. Ukrainians, before – and even more so after – their independence, having in mind the glorious history of the Golden Triangle, and the epoch when Kiev was the center of the *Rus*, which they consider part of their history, have complained about the Russians saying: “They took everything from us, even the name.”

## 2. The semantics of ethnic denominations

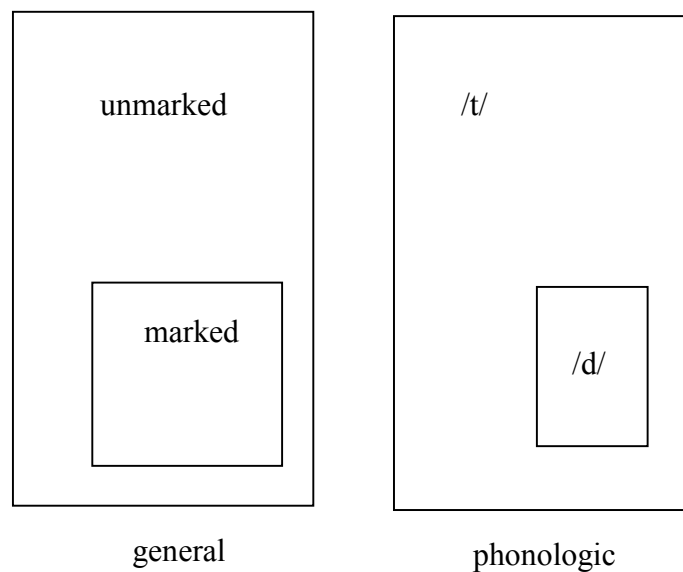
### 2.1 *Inclusive opposition in phonology and word semantics*

In linguistics, as in other sciences, it sometimes occurs that useful insights into the structure of the respective object get lost. The history of linguistics is full of paradigm changes. Murray describes in several studies, especially in Murray (1998), the come and go of theoretical concepts and research groups in the field of sociolinguistics. New scholars are trained in new methods and learn new ways of analyzing. Inevitably, they often do not acquire even central tools of preceding approaches to language description. One such concept, that is nowadays less known, is that of *inclusive opposition*. It is however in the light of this concept, that problems of ethnic semantics and of group denominations can be formulated and brought to a better understanding. The concept is quickly adumbrated.

In his famous *Grundzüge der Phonologie* (1938), N. C. Trubetzkoy explains the principle of neutralization (*Aufhebung eines Gegensatzes*) in phonology ([1938] 1958: 69ss.). He distinguishes *constant* (*ständige*) from *neutralizable* (*aufhebbare*) oppositions. Two sounds are said to be in phonological contrast if they bring about a change on the semantic level if replaced by one another. In German /d/ and /t/ are different phonemes because they are the only contrast in a minimal pair like *du/tu* (*you/do*), *Rade/rate* (*wheel, dative/guess*). The same contrast between voiced and unvoiced holds for *backen* (*bake*) and *packen* (*grab*). However, in certain contexts (called *neutralizable positions* – *Aufhebungsstellungen* – as opposed to *relevance positions*), this opposition does not work. The items of neutralizable structures are said to stand in *inclusive opposition*.

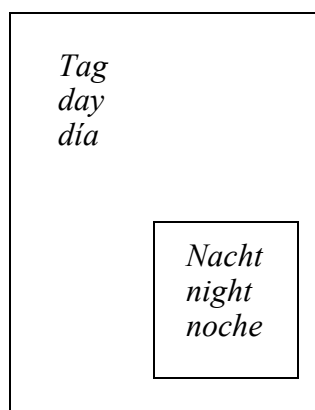
Regularly, for example, *d* is replaced by *t* at the end of the morpheme where /d/ is pronounced as [t]: Hunde [d], but Hund [t] and /b/ as [p] (*Korb*, *Körbe*). What happens here? Both items of the pair have a common basis. /b/ and /p/ share the features *consonant*, *labial*, *plosive*. /b/ has an additional one: *voiced*. One part of the opposition, the *unmarked one*, carries only the common features, so that the marked term shows all the features of the unmarked term plus an additional one, and the marked term is a special case of the unmarked. In the case of neutralization the unmarked term, representing the common base, stands for both items of the whole opposition.

**Figure 1: Scheme of inclusive opposition**



As Coseriu showed in many publications, this scheme applies to word semantics as well. The lexicon shows clear cases of neutralization as the distinctive opposition between *dia* and *noche* or *day* and *night* may illustrate.

Figure 2



semantic

*Day* is the unmarked term, *night* is marked. In many contexts, the opposition is obvious and clear. *Day* is when it is light; *night* is when it is dark. However in some cases, the term *day* doesn't just refer to the lighter periods, but to 24 hours and includes *night*. So, if someone says *I spent three days in Paris*, he doesn't mean that he just spent the light hours in Paris and the nights elsewhere but means "three times 24 hours". In the sentence *The day has 24 hours*, *day* includes *night*, too. Similar cases are portrayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Inclusive opposition in phonology and word semantics

Area	Unmarked term	Marked term	Example of neutralisation
<b>Phonology</b>	/t/	/d/	German final de-voicing
<b>Lexical semantics</b>	<i>day</i>	<i>night</i>	<i>I spent three days in Paris</i>
	span. <i>hombre</i> (engl. <i>man</i> )	<i>mujer</i> (woman)	<i>El hombre está entre Dios y el animal. Los derechos de los hombres.</i>
	span. <i>hijo</i>	<i>hija</i>	<i>Tiene hijos? Sí, tres hijas y un hijo.</i>
	span. <i>niño</i>	<i>niña</i>	<i>reducción para niños</i>

Figure 3 gives examples from Spanish. *Hombre* is the unmarked term, and stands in opposition to *mujer* in *Los hombres quieren a las mujeres*. In other cases, as in *El hombre está entre Dios y el animal*, *Los derechos de los hombres*, this opposition is neutralized. Similarly, *hijo* and *hija* can oppose one another in some contexts, but can also be neutralized in others. Both cases appear in the dialogue: ¿*Tiene hijos?* (*neutralization*). Answer: *Si, tres hijas y un hijo* (*relevance position*). There is a neutralization of the otherwise clear male/ female distinction in *reducción para niños*, which means that a discount is available not just for boys, but also for girls. Neutralizable oppositions are found frequently, and probably universally, in the languages of the world.

It is most important to indicate the logical structure here correctly. We are not dealing with a hyponymic relationship, as the one which holds, e.g. between *dog* and *poodle*. Clearly, not all dogs are poodles, but all poodles are dogs. One would never say *This isn't a dog, it's a poodle* as it is the case in inclusive oppositions, where, the statement, for example, *It's night now, not day* is logically correct. The specificity of the inclusive opposition is the changing value of the unmarked term.

## 2.2 Inclusive semantic opposition in ethnic designations

Many issues of identity conflicts can be traced back to the *ambiguity* of neutralization. Sorbs (a Slavic minority in Germany) may differentiate between Sorbs and Germans. In the quotation *These are Sorbs and those are Germans*, both groups are opposed. It is however clear, that all Sorbs are Germans, and there are cases where the word *German* is not used to mean “German with the exception of the Sorbs”, but to mean “all Germans, including the Sorbs”. The Sorbs, as all other German citizens, have a German passport, and they do not protest against it with good reason. *German* is the unmarked term, and used to represent Sorbs and Germans.

**Figure 4: Table with examples of neutralizable ethnic denominations**

Ethnic designations for	Un-marked term	Marked term	Relevance Position	Neutralization
German	<i>Deutscher</i>	<i>Sorbe</i>	<i>Die Deutschen und die Sorben leben sehr friedlich zusammen</i>	<i>Der Inhaber dieses Passes ist Deutscher</i>
Spanish	<i>Español</i>	<i>Catalan</i>	<i>Muchos catalanes estudian en la UAM pero también algunos españoles</i>	<i>Los españoles también tienen el Euro.</i>
Mexican	<i>Mexicano</i>	<i>Purépecha</i>	<i>Nuestro sacerdote no es purépecha sino mexicano.</i>	<i>Muchos mexicanos trabajan en California</i>

In the area of ethnic names, one finds many cases of inclusive opposition. Especially contrasts between names of nations and smaller ethnic groups are often neutralizable. This may lead to insecurity in communication, to frictions, to vulnerable relations, and to identity conflicts. In the opposition *Catalan* vs. *Spanish*, *Spanish* can – according to the context – include or exclude *Catalan*.

In Latin America one finds comparable examples. Here is a citation of a Zapotecan woman, living in Mexico City, who interprets the names *Zapoteca* and *Mexicana* as exclusive, and feels the need to make a choice. “Sí, me siento por mis papás, por mis abuelos, por todo eso, me siento Zapoteca. O sea no, porque vivo tanto tiempo aquí me voy a sentir este: Mexicana” (Adam 2005: 148). In this utterance, *Zapoteca* is understood as a sign of the difference between the Indios and the rest of the Mexicans and can be understood as expressing the feeling of being excluded from the rest of the society.

The pair *Spanish/Catalan* is another example. One might ask *How many Catalans and how many Spaniards are in this group?* at the *Universidad Autónoma* in Barcelona. On the other hand, there are of course contexts, when one can use the expression *los españoles* also to talk about Catalans, for example in the sentence *Los españoles también tienen el Euro*. As far as the designations in America and Latin America are concerned, let me take a fictional example from the Purépechas, whom I once visited. The Purépechas could probably say “Nuestro sacerdote no es purépecha, sino mexicano”. If this were the case, *Purépecha* and *Mexican* would stand in inclusive opposition to

each other, as it is highly likely, that Purépechas do see themselves in other contexts as Mexicans.

Again, we are not talking about a purely hyponymic relationship, as the one of *dog* to *poodle*, which can never be neutralized.

It is for two reasons that the semantic structure deserves special attention and should be taken seriously. Names of ethnic groups are closely linked to identity. The respective group might notice infringement of denomination as a violation of their freedom and interpret it as a sign of dominance, imperialism or colonialism. The second reason lies in the hidden form of the semantics. People hear the ethnic name and – quite innocently – do not even consider the possibility that it could be used differently. Hidden misunderstandings are often more serious than evident ones.

### 3. The meaning of English *American* and Spanish *Americano*

In this context, it is worth discussing the semantic structure of the Spanish word *americano* (or the English word *American*) and how it is reflected in linguistic usage.

There seem to be more than one usages of the word *America*. *America* can refer to the continent as a whole, consisting of North, Central and South America. Accordingly, all inhabitants of this continent are correctly called *Americans*. Speaking more specifically, one could talk of *South Americans*, *Central Americans*, *North Americans*. There are crystal clear contexts where *America* and *Americans* have an all-inclusive meaning, e.g. *the discovery of America*, or *the first Americans* (here meaning Red Indians), or the *Native Americans* or *Americanism* (as a denotation for Native American influences on the Spanish language). No one would doubt that South Americans are indeed Americans. On the other hand, however, there is an increasing tendency, especially in the USA, which amounts to the use of the noun *America* and the corresponding adjectives *American/Americano* exclusively to refer to the United States of America. So, if one is asked in the USA *How do you like America?* the question is intended to be about the USA. And when the President of the USA says *God Bless America*, he is referring strictly to the USA and does not have Guatemala in mind. To my surprise, during my last visit to Mexico, I observed that Mexicans had also started to refer to US-Americans as

*americanos*, as opposed to Mexicans. Asked why they did this, they answered that they were slowly growing weary of insisting on this differentiation. On the other hand, translating *American* into *americano* is the easiest solution and extremely convenient.

Moreover, there are, for speakers of Spanish, no fully satisfactory alternative names for citizens of the USA. One finds Gringo, Norte Americano, Estadounidense.

If the inhabitants of the USA were to be called Gringos, a somewhat pejorative expression, this would clearly be understood as insulting and as anti-American (another ambiguous term). Gringo originates from a lower layer of language, and as such would not be used in official diplomatic language.

Another, frequently used candidate for an adequate name, well-known for many years, would be *norteamericano*. As somebody who lived in Montreal in the French community for two years and can therefore adopt the Canadian perspective, and especially the French-Canadian one, I know that Canadians, and in particular French-Canadians, are not satisfied with *Norteamericano*, as a denotation for the US-citizens alone, as they are Northern Americans as well and even more northern than the US-Americans.

Elsewhere, there is the word *Estadounidense*, normally found in Latin American media. However, as it is somewhat inelegant and lengthy, one doubts whether it will ever really prevail. Furthermore, it is, to be precise, the Mexicans who are *Estadounidenses* as well, because they also live in a confederation, and their state's official name is *Estados Unidos de México*.

It should not be overseen, that the term *Latin* (in *Latin America/Latin American*) is also a linguistic hot potato. For US-Americans and all Spanish-speaking and Brazilian-speaking people, the term *Latin American* generally designates the whole of the Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking New World. However, French-Canadians have reclaimed this term for themselves and insist on belonging to Latin America, since they, as French-speakers, speak one of the Romance languages deriving from Latin, as well as, and not less than Hispanophone or Lusophone Americans.

What is the semantic structure here? The relationship of the two denotations *americano* and *American* can therefore be represented in



different ways – and these ways can vary from speaker to speaker and from context to context.

Nowadays, three different readings of the word *Americano* are possible. They seem to represent subsequent phases of change so that a three step semantic shift can be observed.

In the first phase (fig. 5 a), the word *America* serves as an overall denomination. It covers a number of singular sub-expressions, such as *Mexican*, *Guatemalan*, *Chilean*, *Brazilian*, and *US-American*, the latter being a denomination for which a short adjective is missing.

In the second step (fig. 5 b), the semantic structure of *American* is transformed into an inclusive opposition. The name may, depending on the context, be used, sometimes as a marked, sometimes as an unmarked term. In the final step (fig. 5 c), there is a new exclusive usage, the term *America* being used exclusively for the USA, with the other countries being excluded (fig 5 c).

Used in such a way, the term *American* would be taken away from the others, the Americans from outside the USA, comparable to the Ukrainian case.

To conclude: a number of extensions of the term *America* exist simultaneously. The usage in which it covers the whole continent is fading, so that the speakers worldwide often feel the necessity to underline its all-inclusive meaning in using differentiating word compositions, such as *South America*. The global society has adopted the term *American* in the restricted sense and the other American people seem to follow their example. Only the future can reveal whether this trend will continue, whether this new standardization will be fully adopted, whether the other countries of the continent will perceive that as an attack on their identity and collective self-esteem and whether they will be willing to tolerate it.

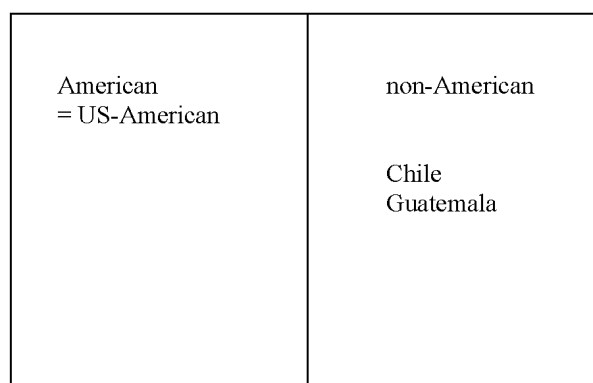
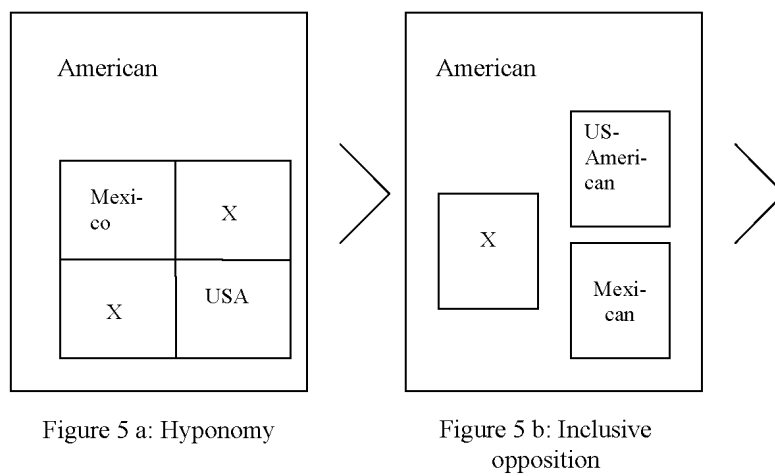
**Figure 5a-c**

Figure 5 c: Exclusive opposition between *America* (designating only the USA) and other nations' names

**Bibliography**

- Adam, Christina (2005): *Indígenas in Mexiko Stadt. – Identitätsentwicklung von Migranten der ersten und zweiten Generation*. Frankfurt an der Oder: Diploma thesis, unpublished manuscript.
- Coseriu, Eugenio (1988): *Einführung in die Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft*. Tübingen: Francke.
- Murray, Stephen O. (1998): *American Sociolinguistics. Theorists and Theory Groups*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Trubetzkoy, Nikolaj S. (1958 [1938]): *Grundzüge der Phonologie*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.